

Drugs (Legal, Herbal, and Otherwise), Medications, Therapy, & Navigating the Mental Health System

I've tried pretty much every imaginable method of treating or preventing mental illness, and some have helped, others made it worse, others had no effect. I more or less learned to accept that this is part of who I am and is just something I have to live with, like any other long-term illness.

But my panic/anxiety/depression/etc can be so intense that life becomes unbearable, especially when I have severe panic attacks or lose touch with reality completely. Drugs and therapy sometimes give me some space to breathe and think. But drugs and therapy don't solve the underlying problems. Talking to people has at least helped me to identify, if not treat, those underlying problems.

On Therapists & Navigating the Mental Health System

When I had Medicaid (u.s. public health insurance) in D.C., both therapy and medication were entirely paid for. However, every insurance is different, and even Medicaid varies from place to place as to what is covered. Nothing can replace community support, but if you can find a good therapist you trust, and a way to pay for it, I think it's worth trying to see one. I found therapy most helpful when I was first coming to terms with my mental illnesses; it gave me a structured setting to work out some issues and figure stuff out. Later on, I realized it was less helpful and felt like rehashing the same thing over and over.

It also had other downsides, like having to fill out demeaning forms, meet with detached for-profit psychiatrists who think they know everything and want to tell you what to do, etc. It may also mean receiving medical diagnoses that both label you and go on a file somewhere, both of which can be alienating and stigmatizing, even under the best circumstances. Do some research to find a therapist or clinic who you think would fit your needs. If you live in a big city, there is probably a decent LGBT clinic, like Whitman-Walker in DC, Callen-Lorde in New York, or Howard Brown in Chicago, who are (usually) better when it comes to issues of sexuality, gender, harm reduction, drugs, sero-status, and diversity in general. It's important that you tell your doctor what drugs you take, especially if you want to start a new medication — this includes stuff like hormones and illegal street meds. So this is why it's even more important to find a trustworthy doctor and/or therapist!

Also, bear in mind that therapy is not for everyone, and it's okay to refuse therapy. For some people, the idea of sitting in a room with a stranger and discussing intimate issues, or being given “assignments” (like keeping a journal, which is a common thing therapists may ask you to do) itself can *increase* anxiety.

On Drugs & Medications

I am not opposed to pharmaceuticals, just pharmaceutical companies. From a [harm reduction](http://www.harmreduction.org/section.php?id=62) (<http://www.harmreduction.org/section.php?id=62>) perspective, I respect people's ability to weigh the risks and benefits of meds. I support self-determination and informed consent. But, I acknowledge that drugs have a lot of harmful side-effects and are I've seen the coercive way they are used in the dominant mental health system on people even if they don't want them. I 100% support non-compliance if that's what you need to do. Sometimes allowing yourself to feel everything — the extreme highs and lows — can even be liberating, allowing you to have unique and perhaps even empowering experiences.

Here is some of what I've learned about drugs, hopefully it can help you make your own decisions... (*I AM NOT A DOCTOR. Always consult a professional before trying anything.*)

- If you take an SSRI (**selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor**, used to treat depression, PTSD and anxiety), you'll probably become chemically dependent. I took **celexa (citalopram)**, an SSRI, every day for a long time. I feel like it helped a lot at first, but the usefulness decreased over time. It's common to need to raise dosages every so often to maintain effectiveness. I decided to go off mine, which I did gradually. It's not smart to quit SSRIs cold turkey, and even then it can be a truly awful experience which you should know before you start. Here is more I wrote on that: [Palliative Care Is Not Enough: Antidepressants, Dependency, and Revolution](#)

(<http://thedistantpanic.wordpress.com/2012/06/11/palliative-care-isnt-enough-antidepressants-dependency-and-revolution/>)

- I also take **klonopin (clonazepam)** as needed for panic attacks and PTSD symptoms. Klonopin is a **benzodiazepine**. I've found that taking a little will pretty reliably help calm me down *a lot*. When taken before bed, it helps me sleep. However, too much will just make me black out. Benzos are also addictive, and benzo withdrawal can be extremely dangerous. *If you use a benzo regularly, consult a doctor before lowering your dose and do not quit cold-turkey.*
- **Xanax (Alprazolam)** has been very effective at treating general anxiety and my mild panic attacks. (After a certain point, nothing seems to help at all.) It takes away all of my emotions entirely, including anxiety, but also everything else with it. It also helps me sleep really well when I have anxiety at night, or cannot sleep for any other reason. It's also sometimes useful in calming me down when I'm manic, but there are mixed reports about how effective benzos like xanax are for that.
- ADHD meds such as **Adderall (Amphetamine)** and **Ritalin/Concerta (Methylphenidate)** have helped give me energy, to focus, and to feel happy whenever I have been really depressed, *but they are extremely addictive and can start to ruin your life very quickly if you aren't careful*. Also, as stimulants, they can also greatly worsen anxiety and mania, by sending my thoughts into rapid-circling negative thoughts that go out of control. If you take a whole lot of them over a short or long period of time (or stimulants of any kind), it can even bring on psychotic experiences.
- I've managed to avoid ever being placed on **mood stabilizers** (typically either something like Lithium or some type anticonvulsants, or both), often used to treat bipolar and lessen intense mood shifts/extremes, because I've heard a lot of horror stories from friends. If your doctor suggests them, I recommend really studying up on it to make sure it's the right decision.
- Some illegal drugs like **MDMA (ecstasy)**, and **ketamine** have been clinically shown to significantly alleviate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD. This is also true of **hallucinogens** like LSD or magic mushrooms, but these can also cause panic attacks far more severe than anything ever imaginable, especially for people prone to psychosis. Pain-killers like **opiates** can do wonders for depression, but are powerfully addictive and can also ruin your life if you're not super careful.
- **Marijuana**, which is legal in some places for recreational use and for medical use in others, can also help for some people with depression, anxiety, and bipolar, but makes other folks paranoid and even more anxious.
- If you're going to self-medicate or use illegal drugs, be extremely careful. Find out how and where to do it safely. If you're on probation or otherwise being monitored by the state, try to keep away from illegal stuff. Know your limits. Do as *little* as you possibly can in order to feel okay. Get help if you feel like you're not in control or you're uncomfortable with how much you're using. I've been an addict, so I know how hard it is. It's okay to admit when you need help.
- Be aware of what other chemicals you're putting in your body. For example, too much **caffeine** is not good for anxiety or mania.

- As far as **herbal medicine** goes, mostly I would recommend **St. Johns Wort, Valerian, and Kava** for anxiety and helping to sleep. Sometimes I use stuff like Rescue Remedy, mostly as a placebo. (If I convince myself it will help, it usually does.)
- To treat depression/anxiety and deal with SSRI-withdrawal, I've also had some success using **5-HTP** and **tryptophan** (naturally-occurring precursors to serotonin that help your body metabolize/synthesize the ladder) supplements that are usually available over-the-counter or at health food stores.

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